

Reviews

The ogresses

by Margaret Moran

Barbara Strachey. *Remarkable Relations: The Story of the Pearsall Smith Family*. London: Gollancz, 1980. 351 pp. £9.95.

ONCE DURING THEIR courtship, Russell wrote to Alys Pearsall Smith: "Relations are all a nuisance but they needn't pester us long" (10 June 1894). Events were to prove this remark far too optimistic. Russell's own people used compelling if futile tactics to prevent this marriage, and in time he found himself much more than simply pestered by his first set of in-laws. Eventually, he was to fear having a child lest it should resemble his wife's mother or one of her formidable cousins.

This book tells the story of the family Russell acquired by his first marriage. From a perspective that is neither judgmental (as Russell's gradually became) nor apologetic, these people are presented as the fascinating, exasperating and eccentric group that they actually were. From the opening section devoted to Alys's parents, Hannah and Robert, the chronicle extends to their descendants into the third and fourth generation. Besides these family founders, their children (Mary, Logan and Alys) and Mary's daughters (Ray and Karin) receive full consideration. But the personality who commands the most attention is Hannah. She dominates the book not only because she is alive for all except the last few pages, but also because her view of the family forms the central idea. Her belief in the pre-eminence of women, especially in the transfer of authority to the eldest daughter, is borrowed to give cohesiveness to an account of the varied circumstances of seven people over the course of an entire century.

Hannah's theory about the matriarchal nature of her line led Barbara Strachey to consider using "The Ogresses" as her title. This is the term that Logan had applied to his overpowering female relatives. Justifiable though the appellation might be, it lacks the advantage of the revision which so deliberately places the emphasis on the interaction among the various members of the family. However dominant Hannah's presence

undeniably is, Strachey's book is nevertheless a group portrait rather than the study of a single individual. As such, it is required to accomplish some difficult tasks that are not expected of a conventional biography.

Instead of tracing one personality in all its complexity, this book makes individual traits and unique experiences—vivid though they are—subordinate to the collective identity of “Smithness”. The power of this consanguinity is established by showing qualities like a penchant for self-dramatization, a tendency to nervous instability, a fondness for crusades and a capacity for independent thought to be shared attributes. A second challenge for a family biographer is that without the predefined boundaries of birth and death which enclose an individual life, the opening and closing must be selected without seeming unduly arbitrary. In theory, ancestry could be traced backward as far as research can reach. Similarly, the various lateral branches and their marriage connections could extend outward almost indefinitely. Barbara Strachey begins with the marriage of Hannah and Robert, although some brief outline of their Quaker background is provided. With a keen sense of the poignant moment, she ends with the death of Alys, the last of the second generation. What makes this conclusion affecting is that Alys's death came only months after a reunion with Russell from which she had derived false hopes about at last being able to rekindle his love. The span of the book follows in general outline the scope of the family archives which the author inherited.

This enormous treasure-trove of over 20,000 letters, many diaries and other memorabilia is used effectively so that the book surpasses an earlier work on the same subject, *The Transatlantic Smiths* by Robert Allerton Parker (1959). One major advantage these documents provide is that they allow the people to speak for themselves. Moreover, the quotations give every incident a sense of immediacy, an uninhibited candour and a satisfying richness of detail. Necessarily, the dependence on these primary sources imposes an anecdotal structure. But since the family members wrote so assiduously about themselves in one form or another, no significant episode can have passed entirely unrecorded. The unevenness in the quantity available about particular segments is not perceptible in Strachey's smooth narration. For example, throughout their courtship, Alys and Russell exchanged an extensive correspondence. In recounting times like these, Strachey judiciously chooses representative passages from the masses of information available. In contrast, there is comparatively little written data to explain why their subsequent marriage failed. For this, Alys's private journal and the one Russell kept between 1902 and 1905 include some very telling entries. These are offered in all their suggestiveness. But Strachey refrains from rash speculation about the

unspoken reasons for their incompatibility.

If specific phases are often dealt with in a rather cursory fashion, this is attributable to the pressure on the author of having to describe so many lives in a single book. There is no room here for the intricate psychological investigation that would have been possible with the maintenance of focus on one subject. Instead, the vignettes in these crowded pages must be eloquent about the underlying motives that produced them. Unpredictability is the rule in the action because everyone is original enough to resist the pressures of conventionality. At the outset, this rebellious independence takes the form of a quest for holiness pursued by Hannah and Robert.

After abandoning their strict Quaker upbringing, they became involved as preachers and popularizers in the Evangelical movement. It was in their capacity as salvationists that they gained ready acceptance to the aristocratic and upper middle-class circles in England. For all the vagaries into which the search for religious exaltation led her, Hannah is said to have had more scepticism and common sense than Robert. This attribution is, incidentally, supported by Russell's recollection of the amusing stories she told him about peculiar sects. He wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell about one such group:

According to her, the lady whom they all followed guided herself by a sign from God—at first, as far as I remember, it was whether her dog wagged its tail. Then Mrs. Smith suggested that this was an inconvenient sign, because the dog might die or get lost, so the lady prayed and got another sign, which was whether her teeth came together with a snap. The whole community guided themselves by this sign. (8 April 1913)

Lacking his wife's resources, Robert was more vulnerable to fanaticism, depression and wayward behaviour. His career as a preacher declined when rumours spread that he had been encouraging and practising the attainment of religious ecstasy through sexual activity.

In the second generation, the spirit of nonconformity manifested itself in new ways with unabated force. The eldest daughter Mary could not be deterred from her determination to marry Frank Costelloe in spite of her parents' opposition to his Catholicism. Nor was she later persuaded against deserting Frank and their two daughters to run away with Bernard Berenson. With the benefit of Berenson's tutelage, she was able to assist his high scholarship in Italian Renaissance art and even to become an acknowledged expert in her own right under the name of Mary Logan. Considering that Mary was raised in an environment that did little to encourage excellence in this field, her achievement is particularly impre-

ssive. With her residual Quaker bias against art, Hannah was unable to develop an appreciation for painting. Granted, she did not carry her suspicions to the same extreme as her sister, who was said to have "gathered up her skirts and marched through the Louvre looking neither to the right nor to the left" (p. 90). Still, she had presumably done nothing directly to nurture Mary's unaccountable sensitivity for art.

Nor is it likely that Hannah had done much overtly to inspire in her son, Logan, the importance of the search for the *mot juste*. Of course, Hannah wrote voluminously, but style to her was a vehicle for an uplifting religious message rather than an end in itself. Her attitude to fiction fluctuated over the years, but she most often felt it to be the devil's invention or a poor substitute for the genuine excitement arising from spiritual fervour. Logan's development into a stylist of great preciousness was therefore as surprising to her as the direction of Mary's career.

Of the three children, Alys was certainly the least aggressive. Instead of rebelling against her parents' ideals, she took them completely to heart. Yet her independent spirit showed itself in the public forum through work for various causes, including temperance and women's rights. Her mettle was tested in the private sphere, too, when Russell's people set about to save him from her. To prevent Bertie from aligning himself with an American family that had made its money from trade, his relations tried to impress him with the obligations of his aristocratic position. A letter from his Uncle Rollo under the heading "Memorandum. Private" began:

You are the heir of the ages; you have an ancestry, as a Russell, nobler and more distinguished than that of any family living in this country, and you have the inheritance of a great tradition. You have more, you have yourself the ability and the aims which may and do make you worthy to succeed the patriots of the past. (12 April 1894)

Alys was impervious to the charge that by wedding her Russell would be squandering all his unique potential. Nor did she waver when aspersions were cast on the mental stability of her family (and, by implication, her own and that of her future offspring). Part of her initial appeal to Russell was the courage that made her epitomize the "advanced" woman (p. 140). Her gradual metamorphosis into the irrevocably dispirited person whom Russell abandoned is presented with a restraint that only increases its pathos.

To permit the unfolding of so many heterogeneous episodes, this book is carefully arranged. Even in chapters which give one person special attention, the other family members are kept in mind to avoid disruption

of the continuity. As Mary's children mature and two more lives require tracing, their experiences are also accommodated. The book thereby fulfils the declaration in the Preface: "[I]t is in their own right and as a family that I believe their story to be the most interesting and their characters most fully revealed" (p. 9).

After having been deserted by their mother and then semi-orphaned by the death of Frank Costelloe, Ray and Karin fell into Hannah's care and influence. By her favouritism for Ray, Hannah did her best to perpetuate her own myth about the supremacy of elder daughters. Yet these two lives turned out to be equally notable for achievement, fortitude and unorthodoxy. Both married into a famous family as well. Ray's husband was Oliver Strachey (Lytton's brother), and Karin married Adrian Stephen (brother of Virginia Woolf).

The author is the daughter of Ray and Oliver. Since Barbara Strachey is a part of her own story, her objectivity is particularly commendable. From childhood onwards, she must surely have formed her own perceptions or heard tales from others about her forbears. Because these people must have been infinitely harder to live with than they are to read about, these impressions can scarcely have been entirely free from prejudice. Yet in this remarkably fairminded rendering of their lives there is no hint of any desire to redress old grievances. Nor is there the slightest tendency to hagiography. Only in the allocation of space so that the women are kept in the forefront is there any obvious sign of authorial arrangement. The absence of crankiness in the treatment does give rise to one serious regret. If they can be written about in this tolerant way by one who carries their genes—and by an eldest daughter at that—then the line of ogresses must indeed be spent.

The Making of a Feminist: Early Journals and Letters of M. Carey Thomas. Edited by Marjorie Housepain Dobkin. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979. US \$15.00.

TO HAVE HEARD initially of Carey Thomas from Bertrand Russell is to have expectations that her self-portrait does not entirely fulfil. Although there were certainly few people in his first wife's family who won Rus-

sell's lasting affection, there were even fewer who ever aroused more distaste than Alys's cousin, Carey Thomas. In his *Autobiography* he described with more amusement than he really felt her tyranny over Bryn Mawr in her capacity as President and her equally awesome control over her own family circle. Surely the private papers of a woman who was so imperious as to earn Russell's intense disapprobation might be expected to be completely engrossing.

Yet the collection assembled by Dobkin of the documents from her youth up to the assumption of her duties at Bryn Mawr proves to be disappointing. These selections from her journals and letters do give entertaining illustrations of her proud intent to demonstrate on behalf of all women their equality to men. Her precociousness led her at the age of thirteen to reduce a mouse to a skeleton in order to show that girls could overcome their squeamishness. Two years later, after hearing a lecturer announce that female brains weigh less than a man's by a few ounces, she was outraged. "One thing I am determined on, and that is by the time I die *my* brain shall weigh as much as any *man's* if study and learning can make it so" (p. 67). Her expressions of high resolve and her subsequent accomplishments are certainly inspiring and impressive. But the disappointment is that there is nothing in *The Making of a Feminist* that is really news to readers of *Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr* by Edith Finch.

This authorized biography, written in 1947 by the woman who five years later became Russell's fourth wife, won his praise in spite of his antipathy for the subject. Such praise was deserved. Perhaps the main virtue of Marjorie Housepain Dobkin's rather gratuitous work is to show just how effectively Edith Finch used her primary sources in order to draw her compelling and balanced portrait. By placing Carey Thomas within the context of her family and associates, Edith Finch provided enough distance so that this ebullient and domineering woman could be seen with the necessary perspective. Because she was far more notable for her actions rather than her capacity for introspection, anecdotes about her can be read with greater interest than her personal reflections. She is seen from the outside in Finch's biography with her strengths and weaknesses in full view. Thus, the biography avoided the claustrophobic sense of entrapment that the private papers create. The personal documents enclose the reader within a mind that was capable of intellectual agility and decisiveness but without great profundity. In Dobkin's book, the slower pace with which the action develops and the limitation to the first three decades of Thomas's life also contribute to the impression of restriction. By forcing Carey Thomas to tell her own story, Dobkin makes her play a role for which she was temperamentally unfit. Instead, she was much better suited for Russell's caricature of the virago or for the

position cast more generously by Edith Finch as one of the foremost American educators of her day.

The Bertrand Russell Editorial Project
McMaster University